

Foreword

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Teachers of Grades 4 through 8 often worry about how to teach writing to students at varying levels of achievement, especially the students who seem to struggle as writers. How can we rev up their energy as writers? How can we set a solid groundwork so that all students, regardless of skill level, eagerly raise their hands to share their writing at the end of a class? With those types of essential questions in mind, the authors of and contributors to this book provide tips about how to tailor and differentiate instruction.

As we teach writers, we gradually become aware of their skills, set goals for their improvement, and monitor their growth. Our students are the ultimate record keepers; as they write, they provide documentation that shows what they can now accomplish compared to what they previously did. They also reveal areas in which they may struggle.

The Student Reflection section of each chapter sets the stage on which writers can become aware of potential and possibilities. Always, the students talk about what they are trying—the new territory into which they are venturing. Perhaps one writer is learning how to incorporate a chart into a draft, another is trying to write with a flashback, and another is learning how to write from a different point of view. Their time to reflect enables them to come to a clearer understanding of what they are trying to do—and they hear what others are trying, which gives them ideas for their own work, as well.

Struggling writers tend to see themselves as failures or, at best, as students who possess few strengths in writing. It may be especially important for these students to become aware of what they can do. As writing teachers, one of our most important tasks is to help all our students come to identify themselves as writers.

Importantly, the “I Can!” strategy chapter (Chapter 2) sets up writers to know what they can do. As a group, they create class charts to show what they learn from mentor texts, and writers create individual charts onto which they record their own strengths. They also see what others can do as they share these charts formally or informally with their classmates. This vision enables them to turn to each other for ideas and assistance. In so doing, their community of writers becomes increasingly strong.

Talk is also crucial to writers because it helps them determine which option to pursue at a particular time and it helps us recognize what skills they need to focus on next. As the authors of this book say, there is no sequence or prescribed

list of what to teach when. It depends on the writers, so we must learn to listen to their needs and tailor our instruction accordingly.

A constant, however, is revision—of all kinds and for all reasons. One reason for revision trumps others, however: the writer’s determination to become better. In some cases, students do not understand revision as literally meaning to “re-see”; instead, they tend to think of revision as editing to correct errors of punctuation, capitalization, and the like. Two refreshing ideas to aid revision may be helpful. One is for writers to study photographs as a way to see information they may not have seen in what they read (Chapter 18), and another is the idea of finding portal words, or windows through which they may be able to re-see their writing (Chapter 15).

Always essential for all writers is their use of authentic mentor texts for fiction, short stories, sports articles, the daily news, and essays. Where do students find the real essays they read so they have a mental model for what essay writers do? Do we ensure that our students study essays online, in print newspapers, and in magazines? According to the wise authors of this book, we always turn to mentor texts to provide the credibility our authentic instruction mandates.

A few of the chapters herein offer specific ideas for writers to try as they learn to incorporate references. To learn to paraphrase and quilt can be helpful because both provide students with multiple opportunities to talk extensively about what they are learning. They put their new knowledge into their own words as they tell their story about their information. When they can explain it clearly, they can write it—without looking at their references.

Character development is another complicated process for young writers. In Chapter 11, the students create cartoons to enable them to show the changes their characters experience. They begin with well-known pop culture characters—a sure way to engage young writers—and they gradually inflate a balloon to help them remember the idea of a character with several attributes. Importantly, as with all the ideas in this book, this process of creating complicated characters can be used in more than one content area.

Also, as is pointed out in every single chapter, English language learners (ELLs) may have specific difficulties with writing. They may need extra support with vocabulary and/or syntax. Significantly, they may benefit from additional opportunities to talk with teachers and classmates who appreciate approximations. It is important for ELLs to talk with not only classmates of their own language but also with English speakers who are good listeners. With these types of support, ELLs gradually become able to explain themselves to all their classmates.

When they write, ELLs may benefit from writing in their native language. As they gradually become more proficient in spoken English, their written texts will, as well, contain a larger percentage of English words. Overall, ELLs write for various trustworthy audiences who appreciate what they can do. The more our ELLs talk and write in supportive environments, the more quickly they will progress.

Strategic Writing Mini-Lessons for All Students, Grades 4–8 will enrich the teaching of teachers and the writing of writers, all of whom thrive in classrooms in which students know their thoughts are sought and honored. The chapters will inspire teachers and students to step forward to enter the conversations that surround them. It will enable them to transform their classrooms into busy workshops in which the writers use multiple processes and learn from each other—and their teachers.